

Human Services Committee Hearing on SB 1012 - March 15, 2011

Dear Senator Musto, Representative Tercyak, Senator Coleman, Representative Morris, and Members of the Human Services Committee,

I stand before you today urging you to oppose SB 1012.

My name is Gigi Whitford and I am a certified Teacher of the Visually Impaired who works for BESB. I am a member of the Children's Services' Special Services Unit, the unit devoted to working with students who have multiple disabilities and/or deafblindness in addition to their visual impairment. I also serve as the Vice President of CATVI, Connecticut Association of Teachers of the Visually Impaired.

Students with multiple disabilities and visual impairment are complex children with unique needs. But this is the reason they require a Teacher of the Visually Impaired backed by the support, expertise and collaboration of an agency exclusively dedicated to the interests and needs of the blind across the lifespan.

I know from experience that BESB is dedicated to the service of students who have multiple disabilities in addition to their visual impairment. BESB has teachers in the Special Services and Preschool Units who have had additional specialized training in the areas of Cortical Visual Impairment (neurologically-based vision impairment) and in deafblindness, as well as one specialist in Deafblindness. We go out to the schools or in to the child's home to provide direct service, and/or consultation to teams. We are there and we aim to answer the questions "What can my child see?", "What will my student be able to understand by using their tactual skills?", or "What do we do next?".

If this bill passes, and BESB is disintegrated, the needs of our clients who have multiple disabilities and deafblindness will suffer by being administered by a Department (Department of Education) whose interests and expertise lie elsewhere, while the rest of our agency will be lost within DSS. I am afraid that the services the children, their families, and their teams receive will be compromised without the support of BESB's leadership and commitment and without the outstanding collaboration between the agency's divisions. The services BESB provides through the coordinated effort of the different divisions is remarkable.

BESB is truly a model for what a strong, streamlined, collaborative State agency should be. I urge you to oppose this bill so that all of Connecticut knows that they can continue to turn to BESB when they have a family member, student, or an employee who has a visual impairment.

Please allow BESB to continue to meet the needs of individuals with visual impairments. Please don't support this bill. Please don't break up BESB. Please don't compromise the futures of my students.

Thank you for your kind attention and consideration.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gigi Whitford". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Respectfully submitted,
Gigi Whitford, M.A.

Certified Teacher of the Visually Impaired